

## Book review

*Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique*, edited by J. P. Moreland, Stephen C. Meyer, Christopher Shaw, Ann K. Gauger and Wayne Grudem. Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, USA. 2017. 1007 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1-4335-5286-1. ISBN-10: 1-4335-5286-8.

REVIEWED BY PAUL GARNER

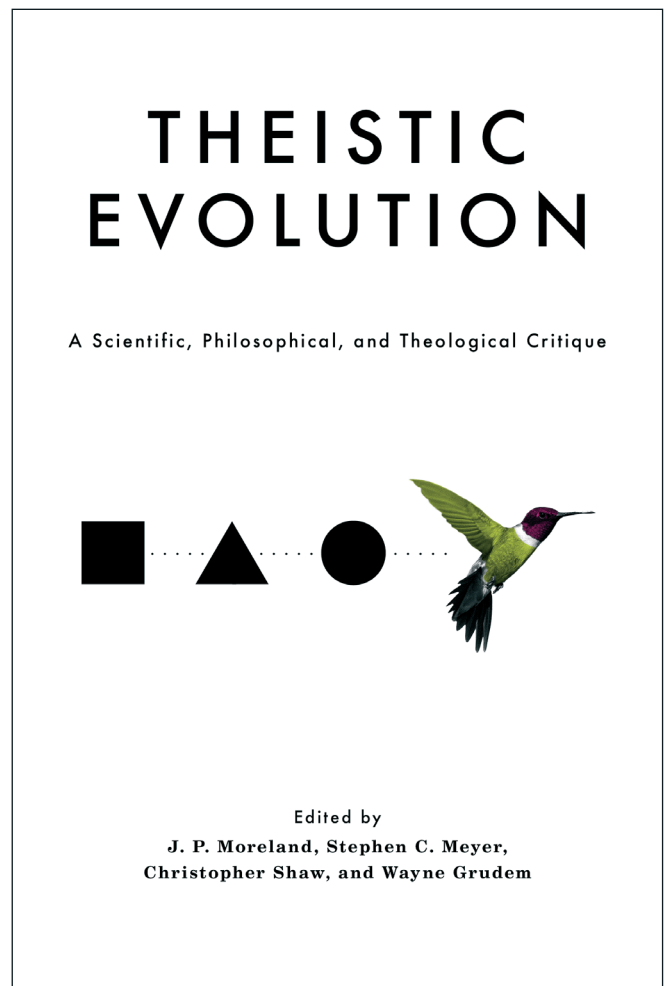
We live in a day when strenuous efforts are being made to persuade evangelicals to rewrite their theology to accommodate the evolutionary theory of origins (Skinner 2017). Books advocating the harmony of Christianity and evolution by scientists such as Francis Collins (Collins 2007) and Denis Alexander (Alexander 2014) are being widely reviewed and read. Well-funded organisations such as The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in the UK and The BioLogos Foundation in the USA are at the forefront of efforts to promote evolution to the churches.

Seminars, training programmes, church conferences, educational materials and student outreach are part of a systematic campaign to ensure that evolution remains coursing through the bloodstream of contemporary evangelicalism. Faced with this crusade, those committed to the biblical account of origins will be indebted to the authors, editors and publishers of this volume for a substantial response to the claims of the contemporary theistic evolution<sup>1</sup> (TE) movement.

*Theistic Evolution* is a multi-author work written from the Intelligent Design (ID) perspective, and the contributors are almost a ‘Who’s Who’ of the ID movement. Philosopher of science Stephen Meyer, author of the books *Signature in the Cell* (Meyer 2009) and *Darwin’s Doubt* (Meyer 2013), opens with a scientific and philosophical introduction, in which he defines TE and argues for its problematic nature. Then, systematic theologian Wayne Grudem gives a biblical and theological introduction, highlighting the incompatibility of TE with the biblical account of creation and with important biblical doctrines.

The rest of the book is divided into three sections. Section I (pp.79–543) offers a scientific critique of TE, Section II focuses on philosophy (pp.545–779) and Section III on biblical and theological matters (pp.781–972). The book concludes with a general index and Scripture index.

In reviewing a book of this scope and depth it is not possible to comment on every chapter, but I will endeavor to pick out some notable highlights.



### THE FAILURE OF NEO-DARWINISM

Section I, the scientific critique, is further divided into two parts. Part 1, ‘The Failure of Neo-Darwinism,’ argues for the inadequacy of natural selection combined with random mutations as a mechanism to explain the origin and subsequent evolution of living organisms.

**Editor’s note:** This book review first appeared in *Evangelical Times* (July 2019) and is reproduced here with permission. We include some minor edits, end-notes and references omitted from that version.

The origin of the biological information encoded in DNA, the limitations of evolutionary mechanisms to produce new, functional proteins and other complex biological molecules and the inadequacies of well-known computer simulations of evolution are among the problems discussed. Synthetic chemist James Tour<sup>2</sup> (chapter 4) draws on his own research experience in nanoengineering to highlight the many obstacles to naturalistic origin-of-life scenarios. He concludes (p.191):

Those who think scientists understand how prebiotic chemical mechanisms produced the first life are wholly misinformed. Nobody understands how this happened. Maybe one day we will. But that day is far from today.

Another major challenge for evolutionary theory is to explain how entirely new body plans could have arisen. The term 'body plan' refers to the major differences in architecture between, say, arthropods (such as crabs), echinoderms (such as sea urchins) and vertebrates (such as fish). Appeals are commonly made to mutations that take place during embryonic development, when body plans are being laid out.

However, there is a problem. Mutations that act late in development have relatively minor effects on an animal's body plan, allowing it to survive and reproduce, whereas mutations that act early in development have major consequences, but are invariably destructive to the organism, even lethal. Evolution is caught on the horns of a dilemma, summed up by the authors of chapter 8 in the pithy aphorism: 'Major change is not viable; viable change is not major' (p.264).

In chapter 9, Sheena Tyler takes up the embryological theme, arguing that developmental processes bear the hallmarks of intelligent design. Moreover, there appear to be major discontinuities between biological forms, implying that each had a separate and unique origin contrary to the claims of evolutionary theory.

She concludes that these 'basic types of life' most closely approximate to the families of the modern taxonomic system (p.309). Examples would be the cat family (including leopards, pumas and lynxes), the bear family (including the polar bear, black bear and sun bear) and so on.

## THE CASE AGAINST UNIVERSAL COMMON DESCENT AND FOR A UNIQUE HUMAN ORIGIN

Part 2, 'The Case against Universal Common Descent and for a Unique Human Origin', presents arguments challenging the idea that all organisms are related by common descent, including humans and modern apes.

Palaeontologist Günther Bechly and Stephen Meyer (chapter 10) describe the abrupt appearances of many higher groups in the fossil record, a pattern that seems to point to major discontinuities between biological forms.

Other chapters address molecular, anatomical, embryological and biogeographical evidences for universal common ancestry, contending that the data often fails to fit the predictions of evolutionary theory. Science philosopher Paul Nelson (chapter 12) poses some important questions that must be asked, among them 'If species were not connected by common descent, how would we know it?' and 'Have we genuinely tested universal common descent, or merely assumed its truth?'

## PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Section II tackles the philosophical underpinnings of TE, specifically the commitment of most TE proponents to methodological naturalism (MN). MN is the philosophical 'rule' that for an explanation to count as scientific it must appeal solely to physical or material causes, and not to intelligent or purposive ones (p.564).

In chapter 19, Stephen Meyer and Paul Nelson show that MN fails as a supposedly neutral principle for how science should operate, and that the truth about the history of life on earth cannot be decided by the application of arbitrary 'demarcation criteria'.

Moreover, Stephen Dille (chapter 20) shows that MN is applied inconsistently even by its own proponents, who make arguments for evolution that are themselves often 'theology-laden' – all the time insisting that theological statements are forbidden by the rules of MN!

J. P. Moreland argues (chapter 21) that TE reinforces an unhealthy scientism by constantly revising biblical teachings and interpretations 'because science says so' (p.633). This, he says, weakens the authority of the Bible among Christians and non-Christians, and helps to sideline biblical truth in the church and in the public square. He says (p.651):

Sometimes theistic evolutionists claim that, by embracing evolution, they are actually contributing to the plausibility of Christianity by removing an unnecessary stumbling block – the rejection of evolution – before one can be a well-informed Christian. In my experience, nothing could be further from the truth.

Rather, he says:

by adopting theistic evolution, people become the church's gravedigger: their strategy may

'If species were not connected by common descent, how would we know it?'

bring short-term success by keeping a handful of scientists from leaving the faith, but over the long haul, it will contribute to the secularization of culture with its scientific epistemology, and to the marginalization of the church.

### INTERACTION OF SCIENCE AND SCRIPTURE

In chapter 24, Colin Reeves addresses the ‘two books’ approach to the interaction of science and Scripture, which can be traced back to the works of Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century and which remains popular among proponents of TE today. The idea is that God has spoken in both ‘the book of nature’ (‘science’ in today’s parlance) and in ‘the book of Scripture’, and that the two are complementary to one another.

However, the author shows that, in practice, science is assumed to be an autonomous source of truth that is always given priority over Scripture. The inevitable result of this flawed approach is that ‘[we] now have a Bible that has lost its authority, is marked by obscurity rather than clarity, and is certainly insufficient for a true understanding of the world’ (p.729).

### PERNICIOUS THEOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Section III puts the spotlight on the pernicious theological consequences of attempting to harmonise evolution with the Bible, and it is here that many of the strongest challenges to TE arise. In chapter 27, Wayne Grudem helpfully sets out twelve points at which TE differs from the biblical creation account taken as an historical narrative, and eleven important Christian doctrines that are undermined by TE.

Old Testament scholar John Currid (chapter 28) challenges popular interpretative schemes purporting to show that Genesis 1–3 is not intended as historical narrative, including John Walton’s idea<sup>3</sup> that these chapters are about the assigning of roles and functions and nothing to do with physical origins.

However, the highlight of this section for me was Guy Prentiss Waters’ chapter 29, ‘Theistic evolution is incompatible with New Testament teaching.’ Waters surveys all the New Testament passages that address Adam and Eve, paying especially close attention to Paul’s arguments in 1 Corinthians 15:20–22, 44–49 and Romans 5:12–21.

He examines the interpretations of these passages proposed by three theistic evolutionists, Denis Alexander, John Walton and Peter Enns, and concludes that in each case ‘the united testimony of the New Testament concerning Adam is rejected’ and that all three authors ‘advance understandings of sin and death that strike at the integrity of the biblical gospel’ (p.925).

### WEAKNESSES OF THE BOOK

Any book of this kind has weaknesses as well as strengths. Occasionally, I disagreed with the scientific, philosophical and theological assessments of the authors. For example, Casey Luskin (chapter 11, pp.368–372) strongly rejects the idea that some animals rafted on mats of floating vegetation as a means of dispersal across oceanic barriers, seeing it as nothing more than a device to ‘rescue’ evolutionary explanations of animal distributions. But rafting is not as absurd as Luskin claims, and in fact it explains a great deal of evidence not accounted for by more traditional biogeographic mechanisms (Wise and Croxton 2003).

Another example is the claimed discovery of a late-surviving Neanderthal in chain mail armour (p.471), remarkable were it true. Sadly, it is not.<sup>4</sup> The skeleton appears to be that of a modern human, with heavy browridges but otherwise lacking typical Neanderthal features.<sup>5</sup>

Another disputable claim concerns whether God can direct an undirected process. Stephen Meyer takes theistic evolutionists to task for affirming that the evolutionary mechanism (natural selection plus mutations) is *both* an undirected process *and* that God is directing it. He says such a position is logically incoherent (pp.43–44).

However, I imagine theistic evolutionists will push back on this claim, pointing out (rightly) that the Bible portrays God sovereignly directing lots of processes that *appear* to us undirected (e.g. the drawing of lots – Proverbs 16:33; Acts 1:23–26). The objection that theistic evolutionists confuse God’s miraculous work of creation with his providential work of sustaining has some force (Tyler 1983), but that seems different to the claim Meyer is making. There are plenty of cogent reasons to reject TE; I just don’t think Meyer’s objection is one of them.

some of the most powerful arguments against theistic evolution arise from the chronological problems that it presents.

Furthermore, the book avoids the age question altogether. As Wayne Grudem explains in his introductory essay (p.62): ‘This book does not take a position on [the age of the earth], nor do we discuss it at any point in the book.’ Nevertheless, the chapters dealing with the fossil record ‘operate within the commonly assumed chronological framework of hundreds of millions of years for the earth’s geological strata’ (pp.62–63, n.1).

Although this decision is understandable, in some ways it is unfortunate, because some of the most powerful arguments against TE arise from the chronological problems that it presents. The irony is that some of

the biblical arguments made against TE in the book are equally problematic for the old-earth creationist position embraced by many of the authors, whether or not they have realised it!

For example, Wayne Grudem objects to TE on the grounds that it implies that not all human beings have descended from Adam and Eve, and that there were thousands of other human beings on earth at the time that God chose the two of them. But this problem arises from the conventional dates applied to the human fossils, and both theistic evolutionists and old-earth creationists embrace those dates.

According to conventional dating schemes, modern humans have a fossil record that extends back 300,000–200,000 years (Richter et al. 2017). That means there is no way that all humans alive today could be descended from one man unless Adam lived at least that long ago, a proposal that seems contrary to a straightforward reading of the biblical genealogies (e.g. Genesis 5:1–32, 11:10–32).<sup>6</sup>

The alternative is to locate Adam much more recently in history, say less than 20,000 years ago. This is more in line with the biblical genealogies, but it would mean that Adam could not be the ancestor of most people living today, for the simple reason that humanity was already widely dispersed across the globe by that time. Such considerations suggest that Christians wishing to affirm Grudem’s points about Adam and Eve ought to reject not only TE, but the standard ‘old-earth’ time scale as well.

However, these points of criticism do not detract from the overall usefulness of this volume. It is intellectually stimulating and faith-affirming. Thoughtful non-specialists and pastors will be helped, as well as those more deeply immersed in the origins debate. The book brings together many arguments against TE in one volume, and provides useful responses to some recent trends in evangelical thinking. Read it alongside other recent resources addressing other aspects of theistic evolution, including from young-age creationists such as Stephen Lloyd (Lloyd 2017), Simon Turpin (Turpin 2018) and Philip Bell (Bell 2018).

## ENDNOTES

1. Sometimes referred to as ‘evolutionary creation’.
2. Noted by Meyer (p.51) as ‘not a partisan in the TE debate’.
3. As popularised in Walton (2009).
4. The paper describing the find (Stołyhwo 1908; written in French) can be found at <http://www.ianjuby.org/neanderthal>.
5. For example, the forehead is high (Neanderthals had

low, sloping foreheads), the nasal aperture is narrow (Neanderthals had broad apertures) and the back of the skull lacks an occipital bun (a prominent feature in Neanderthals). See <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/homs/armor.html>.

6. The constraints imposed by the biblical genealogies indicate that Adam lived about 6000 years ago. Even if the genealogies are incomplete, as some argue, the amount of time that can be inserted into them is extremely limited. Since the fathers listed in Genesis 11 had their sons at age 35 or less, about 300 missing generations would be needed to add even 10,000 years to the chronology. To extend the date of Adam’s creation back to 200,000 years we would have to insert 6000 missing generations – clearly an absurdity in genealogies that together contain only 20 generations! And the problem gets worse if we consider earlier members of our genus to be descendants of Adam too. *Homo ergaster* and *Homo erectus* have a fossil record going back almost two million years.

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#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Paul Garner** is a full-time Researcher and Lecturer for Biblical Creation Trust. He has an MSc in Geoscience from University College London, where he specialised in palaeobiology. He is a Fellow of the Geological Society of London and a member of several other scientific societies. His first book, *The New Creationism: Building Scientific Theories on a Biblical Foundation*, was published by Evangelical Press in 2009.

